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2021 Global Food Policy Report finds lessons from COVID crisis for reducing inequities and enhancing resilience of food systems

April 13, 2021, Washington, D.C. – The severe health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have disrupted food systems and upended livelihoods. Yet pandemic responses have demonstrated the power of well-crafted policies to blunt the impact of major shocks while laying the groundwork for stronger, more resilient food systems, according to the *2021 Global Food Policy Report*, released today by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). The report provides lessons drawn from the current crisis that can help us transform food systems to reduce the impact of the ongoing pandemic, better prepare for future shocks, and address longstanding weaknesses and inequalities.

“We have known for a while now that there are major problems with our food systems, that they are unequal and unsustainable,” said Johan Swinnen, director general of IFPRI. “This crisis has revealed these problems in a way that none of us can ignore, but it has also demonstrated that we have effective ways to address these problems.”

The report draws on evidence from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) across the globe to analyze both the impacts of and the policy responses to the crisis, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups, who have suffered disproportionately. The report details how livelihoods, food security, and nutrition have been affected; how and why impacts have varied across regions and countries; and what our food systems and food supply chains need to look like to better absorb such shocks in the coming years.

"There is no better time than now to seize the moment to start doing something about our food systems," said Agnes Kalibata, secretary general special envoy to the 2021 Food Systems Summit, at a launch event for the report. "This report is a huge tool for unlocking the evidence and actions that can help us move forward."

Unsurprisingly, the report finds that COVID-19 and restrictions on social interactions and business operations have disproportionately affected marginalized people in LMICs, driving up poverty – by as much as 20%, according to IFPRI estimates – and malnutrition. Supply chain disruptions have also taken a toll on dietary quality and diversity, leading to increased nutritional deficiencies, particularly among vulnerable groups. IFPRI projections suggest that the declines in food security and proper nutrition from the pandemic could cause an additional 6.7 million children to experience wasting in 2020 alone.

"This report treats the pandemic as a wake-up call," said Marco Ferroni, chair of the CGIAR System Board. "COVID-19 could be a harbinger of potentially greater future disruptions to food security and livelihoods, linked to climate change, natural resource degradation, and biodiversity loss."

Among vulnerable populations, women, for example, have faced disproportionate burdens throughout the crisis, and national policy responses have largely failed to adopt gender-sensitive approaches that could narrow the gender gap. Although women make up 39% of the global workforce, they account for 54% of the jobs lost during the pandemic. The report suggests future efforts to respond to shocks include complimentary programming to increase gender equity and protections for other vulnerable groups, including refugees and displaced people.

The report also highlights key lessons from the pandemic about food systems. In general, demand-side effects, due to job losses and falling incomes, had a stronger impact on food security than supply disruptions. Food value chains, despite many disruptions, proved to be fairly resilient, albeit with variations

across commodities and regions; and policies declaring agrifood workers and services as essential helped to cushion disruptions. Research findings show that food systems transitioning from traditional to modern, characterized by longer but often fragmented supply chains, proved to be most vulnerable.

Many countries invested heavily in social protection measures to help stem rising poverty and food insecurity, increasing benefits or expanding them to new recipients. Programs built on robust existing systems were the most successful, but the scale of growth in programs across the globe showed that widespread political will can rapidly grow such pro-poor programming.

“In many low- and middle-income countries, the impacts of COVID-19 have been lower than expected during most of 2020, and evolving policy responses have, in many cases, helped to mitigate damages,” said John McDermott, director of the CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health.

He cautioned that the pandemic is evolving quickly, however, with Africa, South Asia, and Latin America experiencing new waves of disease and vaccine delivery delays expected for many LMICs. “While we don’t expect returns to strict early lockdowns in most LMICs, we are still in the middle of this crisis and do not yet know how things will play out going forward.”

Learning from what has and hasn’t worked can play a major role in curtailing the impacts of the ongoing pandemic and meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Major shocks like COVID-19 that disrupt food, health, and economic systems are likely to increase due to climate change and global interconnectivity, making transforming these systems imperative. The report suggests three avenues for increased resilience: limiting the frequency and magnitude of shocks; investing in early warning systems to anticipate shocks; and building capacity to adapt to and absorb shocks when they happen.

The report notes the important role of private sector innovation in times of crisis, which requires an enabling policy environment, as well as physical and digital infrastructure. Better digital infrastructure is imperative not only for a business environment that fosters innovation, but also to bridge the “digital divide” that leaves the world’s most vulnerable underserved and more exposed to the impacts of crises.

COVID-19 has presented the opportunity for making these and other changes that will transform the world’s food systems. Doing so, the report’s contributors

stress, will require multifaceted, evidence-based approaches as well as cooperation and collaboration within and across sectors and borders.

“The pandemic has shifted the political equilibrium of what is possible – showing that we have the will and capacity to make big changes to transform food systems for the better. We need to seize this opportunity at every level of policy and throughout food systems so we are better prepared to deal with the next major shock and able to transform food systems toward more inclusion, more sustainability and better health,” said Swinnen.

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) provides research-based policy solutions to sustainably reduce poverty and end hunger and malnutrition in developing countries. IFPRI was established in 1975 to identify and analyze alternative national and international strategies and policies for meeting the food needs of the developing world, with particular emphasis on low-income countries and on the poorer groups in those countries. It is a research center of [CGIAR](#), a worldwide partnership engaged in agricultural research for development. Visit www.ifpri.org Follow: [@IFPRI](#); On [Facebook](#)

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